

# The Very Best Of

# 1950s

# MUSICALS

**W**ith the release by CBS Fox of *South Pacific*, we thought it would be a good time to take a brief journey down memory lane as far as musicals of the 1950s are concerned. For the 50s were an important time for musicals. To start with, the 50s saw the introduction of various new big screen projection techniques (CinemaScope, Todd-AO, Vista Vision and so on).

In fact, I recall seeing *South Pacific* when it was released in London, and it was previewed by a short history of projection techniques – a very dramatic presentation, for, as it came to a close, there was a clashing of cymbals, and the curtains began to open even wider and wider to take in the screen for *South Pacific*.

At the time, it was stunning (more stunning than the movie some thought).

This was also the era when stereo and other multi-track sound systems came along, and the musicals adapted eagerly to these changes.

(With the advent of TV and video, these changes became harder to adapt to, and they have created other problems for transfer technicians – and viewers!).

The other important revolution was the introduction, in the middle of the 50s, of rock 'n' roll, which not only changed the nature of the recording industry and radio, but also brought along a new generation of movie musicals.

In one respect, the style developed over the years in the musicals of Busby Berkeley and Fred Astaire, reached a peak in such 50s classics as *Singin' In The Rain* (MGM), *Funny Face*, *Band Wagon*, *Gigi* and *A Star Is Born*.

But, at the same time, some of the worst ever musicals also found themselves released in the 50s (*Girl Rush* for example).

In between were a lot of expensive productions which, although brought to the screen by very talented people, found themselves bogged down with problems that ended up making the movies disappointing.

By the 50s, most musicals were in colour, and in terms of production values, were superior to most that had gone before.

Sometimes they tried too hard to be bigger and better than predecessors, and many of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals (especially *Carousel* and *South Pacific*) suffered because of this.

Several biographical movies about 30s and 40s musicians (*The Glenn Miller Story*, for example), made brief inroads, but did little to slow the popularisation of rock.

Even so, the best 50s musical not only survived the onslaught of rock, but keep on



Above left: Gene Kelly in *Singin' In The Rain*.

Above: Hermione Gingold in *Gigi*.



surviving today, and many of these are available on video.

Some of them belong in the collections of us video musical buffs, but for those who are not quite as fanatical as I, excerpts on such compilation tapes as *That's Entertainment* are worth having.

Here are some of the most memorable musicals of the 50s available on video:

**Show Boat** (1951), MGM/UA. The sets, costumes and overall production of this MGM remake were far more spectacular than Universal's classic 1936 version, and, at the time, MGM claimed the show boat itself was the largest movable prop ever made for a movie. The cast includes Kathryn Grayson, Howard Keel, Ava Gardner, William Warfield, Joe E. Brown).

**Singin' In The Rain** (1952), MGM/UA. One of my favorite musicals. It's got the lot – great songs, terrific dances (co-directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen), a good story which takes the mickey out of movie musicals themselves, and a great cast: Gene Kelly, Donald O'Connor, Debbie Reynolds, Cyd Charisse and Jean Hagen, in a role originally planned for Judy Holliday before she made it big in *Born Yesterday*. For me, the highlight is Donald O'Connor's "Make 'em Laugh" – brilliant.

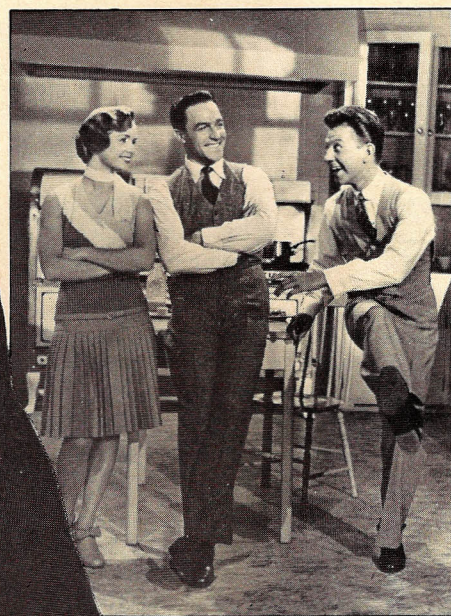
**Gentlemen Prefer Blondes** (1953), Magnetic Video. For all its fame as Marilyn Monroe's best musical, it's the brunette who comes close to stealing the movie – Jane Russell, who even gets top billing. Some great songs, my favorites being "Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend" and "We're Just Two Little Girls From Little Rock."

**A Star Is Born** (1954), Warner Home Video. Judy Garland gives the performance of her life in this remake of the popular 1937 Janet Gaynor/Frederick March movie, which was based, in turn, on a 1932 movie starring Constance Bennett called *What Price Hollywood?*, about the devastating personal price of Hollywood stardom. Not only is Judy at her singing peak, but she also turns in an acting performance that makes the most of her serious and comedic talents. James Mason is also great as the actor, down on his luck, whom she loves. Every song in it is a gem.

**The King And I** (1956), Magnetic Video. First 20th Century-Fox made a good, straight dramatic version of *Anna And The King Of Siam* in 1946, then Rodgers and Hammerstein made a hit Broadway musical of it. Then Fox completed the circle, turning it into even a better and more lavish movie musical, and also turning Yul Brynner into the first completely bald international star. Brynner is great as the 19th century royal autocrat who learns to modernise some of his ways from his children's En-



Fred Astaire and Vera-Ellen. Above right: Debbie Reynolds, Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor in *Singin' In The Rain*.



glish governess, played beautifully by Deborah Kerr (with Marni Nixon dubbing her singing voice).

**GIGI** (1958), MGM/UA. An oscar winner in the Best Picture category, and one of the most elegantly sumptuous French sex comedies ever made in America. Good direction from Vincente Minnelli (Liza's dad and Garland's hubby), Good screenplay from Alan Jay Lerner (*My Fair Lady*), costumes and production design, cinematography, and performances from Leslie Caron, Maurice Chevalier, Louis Jourdan, Hermoine Gingold. This was the last but one movie for producer Arthur Freed, and everything goes together beautifully.

**West Side Story** (1961), Warner Home Video). Although not technically a 50s musical, this is very much a 50s musical, as it is the movie version of the 1957 Broadway version. It is the logical culmination of the blending of song and dance as developed

through the 40s and 50s. This modern variation on *Romeo And Juliet* also tries to make serious points about ethnic conflict in New York in the 50s. All of the original Leonard Bernstein-Stephen Sondheim score is kept in the movie, although two songs (Cool and Dear Officer Krupke) are used in different places. The cast includes George Chakaris, Rita Moreno, Russ Tamblyn, Elliot Feld, and the two leads are Natalie Wood (with her singing voice dubbed by Marni Nixon again) and Richard Beymer (singing voice Jim Bryant). But what a great movie.

Other movies from the 50s that I await eagerly to come on video include: *The Pajama Game*, *Pal Joey*, *The Girl Most Likely*, *Funny Face*, *Oklahoma!*, *The Band Wagon*, *Call Me Madam* and *An American In Paris*.

So start the year off well, by rushing out and hiring and/or buying, and/or searching through some of the specials, to add these to your collections.